

Volunteer rescuers prove unstoppable Despite choking dust, lack of rest, firefighters continue their search **TERRORISM STRIKES AMERICA**

SUN NATIONAL STAFF

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NEW YORK - The dust is salty, and sometimes vaguely sweet. It tastes of chalk and aluminum, like a dirty bottle cap might. It has gone from black to brown to bleached white, getting finer by the day. Now, it is as fine as talcum - or pumice, the stuff of eruptions.

South of Canal Street in Lower Manhattan, for blocks around where the **World Trade Center** once stood, it has become inescapable. "I've been throwing it up, hacking it up, blowing it out, but I can't get rid of it," said firefighter Mike Kozak, 41, in the grip of another fit of sneezing and spitting inside the garage of Engine 7-Ladder 1 Co. on Duane Street.

"They keep saying there's no asbestos in it, but we know better than that.

"Actually, asbestos is the last thing I'm worried about."

"God only knows what's in it," mumbled Frank Esposito, 45, a father of four and Kozak's "line buddy," the man he hooks his belt to when they're out digging on "the pile."

It's a subject no one much wants to talk about with strangers, not the details anyway. But it's on all their minds. Anyone who's been on the pile knows there's not much left out there. No desks, no chairs, no filing cabinets, no office water coolers.

"Everything is the consistency of cement when it's first poured out of the bag," said Capt. Bob Moody of the Montgomery County Fire Department, a battalion chief from Maryland.

'All just pulverized'

He is also a rescue expert and co-author of several manuals on recovery operations. "It's all just pulverized."

Standing outside the Engine 7 station house, covered in grime, Moody leaned on his filthy Jeep and rattled off some calculations concerning "impact ratios" and "terminal velocities" and the fact that objects gain many times their actual weight as they fall great distances.

"Stuff just explodes when it finally hits the ground," he said, as he prepared to go home

to Maryland after three days volunteering on the line.

Much of it is now powder, the pumice left over when the twin 110-story towers collapsed Tuesday, fired by hundreds of gallons of jet fuel from two hijacked airliners.

And still the rescuers come. Breathing in it. Working in it. Sleeping in clothes covered with it. The hundreds of rescue diggers, the police dog units, the heavy equipment jockeys, the iron workers, the plumbers and telephone linemen - all led by the dog-tired, fiercely loyal and very angry New York Fire Department.

"People have been incinerated," said Kozak, leaning on a step ladder as his broad, square back heaved up another mouthful of ash onto the concrete garage floor.

Outside, blue biohazard gloves flecked rusty red and white are strewn down the block, cast off by an earlier shift.

Hundreds of clogged hospital dust masks lay balled on the pavement.

It's a small miracle that the men of Engine 7 are alive themselves. Through a sheer twist of fate they were diverted from the **World Trade Center** moments before the first plane hit by a report of a gas leak blocks away.

That diversion made them the only company in the immediate vicinity of the **World Trade Center** that didn't lose a single man when the towers collapsed.

A litany of the lost

Esposito began the now-familiar litany: "Rescue One, Rescue Two, Rescue Five. Gone ..."

"Engine 6, Engine 10, Ladder 10, gone," Kozak choked.

"Ladder 20, gone," said Esposito, cinching up his suspenders.

"Ladder 4 and 54, Engine 15, good men: lost." Kozak said.

The big man finally straightened up, bellowing to the back of the company garage: "Come on, guys ... I'm going nuts standing around here!"

"Let's go, already!" yelled his partner, whipcord-lean with a balding head and a gimpy knee.

Esposito was forced into retirement four years ago after a fire-escape collapse. He fell a couple of stories and landed in the wreckage. Hurt his back, blew out his right knee. Full disability at 41.

He was scheduled for replacement surgery, but it didn't come soon enough.

"Hurts like hell right now," he said, clamping a cigarette between his teeth and massaging his throbbing leg. "I ain't even supposed to be here. But no way I'm letting these guys go out there without me."

The work? "Unpaid," he said. ."

Back through the station house kitchen, past the dirty donated mattresses where they've been sleeping on the concrete floor, a poster still warm from an uptown printing press hung on the ready room dart board: Osama bin Laden, with a crimson bull's eye on his forehead.

The sentiment runs high among rescue workers.

Since pulling an injured Port Authority police officer from the rubble Wednesday morning, they haven't rescued many.

"I've been in four or five times now, and I'm going back in this afternoon," said Andy Berry, 40, a heavy equipment manager from North Bergen, N.J., who commands a battalion of 15 heavy earth movers with American flags flying from their mirror mounts. "And I'm just so pissed off, I can't even tell you."

Berry glowered across Canal Street, south toward ground zero, waiting for the order to move.

More than 4,700 people remain missing, including 23 New York City police officers and more than 300 firefighters.

Near where Berry sat at the head of his column of earth movers, streetlight poles, mailboxes and bus shelters around Duarte Square were plastered with handbills and pictures of the missing, scrawled with pleas for help.

`Please help'

"**World Trade Center**, MISSING, Jayceryll de Chavez, please contact us if you have seen him."

"Please help us find our dad. Contact: FindRobertFerris@Hotmail.com."

"Roger Mark Rasweiler, 5' 8", 185 lbs., hair: brown w/ gray beard, please call."

Embedded in a pool of melted candle wax left over from a prayer vigil the night before, a child's drawing shows a ladder leaning against a purple Crayon drawing of the **World Trade Center**: "Thank you for all the stuff you did for our country. Thank you FDNY. You put out the fires."

Six blocks away, after wolfing down some sandwiches and coffee and bottled water, Kozak and Esposito finally get their rig rolling again.

"Gotta go, guys," yelled Kozak, the father of a 10-year-old girl, to his station brothers.

It was his sixth or seventh time heading back into the void, back to the ceaseless machinegun clatter of the jackhammers, the steady "Psst! Psst! Psst!" of the air compressors, the roar of the bucket loaders, the blinding work lights.

Back to the dust. Esposito chases his partner out to the rig: "Don't forget your mask, man!"

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